

A Novel by **Thomas YH Chan**

Watershed

Nostalgia and Wishful Thinking

*Watershed:
Nostalgia and
Wishful Thinking*

A Novel

By Thomas YH Chan

About the Author



THOMAS YH CHAN

Born into a middle class family in Hong Kong (whose forebears had migrated down to South China from Manchuria), Thomas YH Chan grew up under British colonial rule and western education, going to a Catholic elementary school and then to a public school for his secondary schooling before going to college in Germany, studying initially Physics and Mathematics and then switching to Logic and Philosophy. After spending two years of student life at the University of Heidelberg in the then West Germany, Thomas returned to Hong Kong on his father's advice to complete a bachelor's degree programme in German Literature and Philosophy at the University of Hong Kong (HKU). Right after graduation Thomas took up teaching as a tutor at the Department of Philosophy at HKU and on completion of the two-year contract continued his graduate studies in Philosophy at the University of Vienna from which he graduated with a doctorate.

As a returned student from Germany Thomas shouldered the responsibility of liaising with and looking after visiting foreign students to HKU, particularly ones from continental Europe. This continued well into the early years of his academic career, first at HKU and then later on at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) where he served for twenty long years as a Professor of German and English, before taking up his appointment as Head of Department of English at Hong Kong Chu Hai College of Higher Education, a local private postsecondary college, where he devoted ten long years to nurturing his students. Since May 2017 Thomas has been serving as Professor in the School of Humanities and Languages of Caritas Institute of Higher Education in Hong Kong.

In terms of language teaching Thomas has designed and taught courses in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) as well as in ESP (English for Specific Purposes), in particular Maritime English and Technical Writing for engineering students, owing largely to his science background and his interest in both technology and the fine arts.

Thomas got interested in the magic of words and literature at an early age and as an undergraduate soon began to write articles for the HKU student newspaper while serving at the same time as the newspaper's secretary and assistant editor. He also contributed articles to local newspapers, most of which were on literary and philosophical issues and themes. As

a graduate student at the University of Vienna Thomas had the opportunity to acquaint himself in-depth with European visual art and come to appreciate it, so much so that even today he is still giving lectures and designing courses on Western Art and Culture for his students.

To date, Thomas has written four novels, the first one on European culture, in particular visual art in Germany and Austria, titled *Journey to the West: Searching for Love, Intellect and Art History* and the second one on logic and critical thinking, basically for his students, titled *Who Needs Critical Thinking Anyway?.* The third novel titled *Two for the Road on Exchange to Germany* has evolved from Thomas's effort to enable his students to acquire the basics of German through reading a novel, the story of two Hong Kong college students trying hard to master German while going on academic and cultural exchange to a key German university. To date, Thomas has written his fourth book titled *Watershed: Nostalgia and Wishful Thinking*, published in March 2020, which is a departure from his former novels in that this is a book on politics, culture and the future of the world and Hong Kong.

Table of Contents

Foreword: Why I Am Writing This Book

Prologue

Part I: Watershed

Part II: Nostalgia

Part III: Wishful Thinking

Epilogue

Why am I writing such a book?

This is again a novel. It is the fourth novel that I have written and published as E-Books since 2015. But this is a different novel. For one thing, the structure of this novel is modelled on *Plato's Republic* in being a series of dialogues or conversations, between a half-retired professor and his former student.

Why am I writing this book in the form of a novel and why is it made up totally of dialogues or conversations?

My answer is *fourfold*.

First of all, born and brought up in Hong Kong under British colonial rule, I have always had a kind of love-hate relationship with the British and other westerners with whom I have been in contact, in my school days, in my college days, at work and even at play throughout long years of my life in Hong Kong, even after the handover in 1997. On the one hand I detested the bigotry and racist condescending attitude towards me and other local people like myself. This should be understandable, as British colonials have actually behaved and treated local people under their rule in a deplorable way. But then on the other hand, I must admit that I have benefited a lot from their efficient and effective administration and management of public services, making life rather pleasant and comfortable for some people, including myself, my family and my friends. In particular, I became very learned and knowledgeable through an elitist education I was fortunate to enjoy, even if it must be labeled colonial and indoctrinating. Considering the turmoil and political instability prevailing in China at that time, and the fact that we in Hong Kong were basically shut off and secluded from the Mainland and knew next to nothing about what was going on there, the kind of life that I went through from boyhood through adolescence must be taken to be a boon in itself.

Then I must admit that I am nostalgic about various events and activities that I had been engaged in throughout all these years since boyhood in Hong Kong. I hold them all in fond memory and would ruminate and recall them every now and then, just to make myself happy and feel romantic about it all. That is why I have attempted to describe a couple of such events and boyhood hobbies in this novel as well. But I must emphasise that nostalgia

for me is not an illness, and I do not entertain any wish for such events or activities to return. No, not at all, unlike what some westerners seem to wish for a return of their glorious past and supremacy over other peoples' land and sovereignty. This is what I call *nostalgia* that leads to their *wishful thinking*.

The third reason for me to write such a book is my reaction and response to what has been taking place in Hong Kong since May and June 2019. We all know what has been happening, and I will not pretend that this has been just a series of 'public activities', as the media in Hong Kong and even the Hong Kong SAR Government choose to call it. To me this is out and out rebellion and an attempt for a *putsch*, an attempt to overthrow the Government and by extension to eventually overthrow the Government of the People's Republic of China. I find this totally unacceptable and very distasteful, so much so that I must commit 'pen to paper', as it were, to voice out my sentiments against such a treasonous act on the part of the young people in Hong Kong, most of whom were not even born yet before 1997. I have tried to relate all these superficially inexplicable happenings and even violent deeds committed by these rebels and self-acclaimed 'revolutionaries' to the history of both China and Hong Kong. The various strands of my 'theory' are a major part of the conversations in the book.

The last reason for this book, which is also the most important and central reason is also what gives this book the title, namely, *Watershed: Nostalgia and Wishful Thinking*. It is crystal clear to me that the rebels and 'revolutionaries' in Hong Kong could not have launched such a massive assault without sufficient and professional planning and backing in terms of resources and political reassurances. I surmise that most of these must have come from some foreign forces in the United States of America, Taiwan and even Britain and other former British territories like Australia, Canada and New Zealand – just one look at the way these countries have been reacting to the Hong Kong situation would make my contention credible. Therefore, I would point to the inescapable conclusion that the West, led by America, is still nostalgic about their glorious past and is still deep in their wishful thinking for a return of their past supremacy and world domination. The recent epidemic has also confirmed their mentality, as what China has been getting from the western media and western politicians is nothing but bad mouthing and the spread of a phobia that may affect their nationals in China.

I conclude the book with a wish that one day people everywhere on this globe will accept the fact that we humans are all members of the same *species – homo sapiens*, regardless of skin and eye colour, language, nationality and religion. Some people may think that such a wish for world harmony and meaningful coexistence and collaboration instead of confrontation and conflict, is naïve. But I do hope that such a naivety may come to pass some day soon.

I hope you, the reader, will enjoy reading my scribbling!

Prologue

*The Watershed imperceptibly shifting
From West surely back to East
Five Centuries of Domination
To conclude in Nostalgia and Wishful Thinking*

*The Wheel of History unstoppable, and turning
To bury past Western Glory and Supremacy
Rapidly
Into Oblivion*

*To "Turn the Clock Back"
Romantic but Juvenile
"The Time Machine"
Failing to take off before becoming Senile*

*The Fragrant Harbour, alas,
Sacrificed for Nostalgia and Wishful Thinking
To rise unscathed from the Fire
The Pearl of the Orient emerging as the legendary Phoenix*

Part I: Watershed

Good afternoon Professor! Sorry I am late. It took me quite a while to find this restaurant. Have you been waiting long?

Oh no, no. Don't worry Julian. I have been sitting here for a while already, sipping fine tea and reading today's newspapers. Just make yourself comfortable. Right here, please, take the seat here close to me, so we'll be able to chat our hearts out, haha!

Sure. Right. This restaurant looks very special. Is it your favourite restaurant?

Yes. I come here almost everyday, now that I am half-retired. Is it difficult to find?



You can say that again. It has taken me a long time to figure out that this restaurant is nested high up here on the roof of a somewhat unassuming old building. Why do you like this restaurant? Is there anything special about it?

Yes, yes, you're right. There's really something special about this place, and also about how it is related to the current situation in Hong Kong. I'll tell you about it in a moment. But first things first. Have some *puer tea*. This is a quality tea here, not just any puer tea that you find in any restaurant or teahouse in town. Actually, if you can spare the time and if you are interested in listening to what I intend to speak to you, and it may take hours, then I'm going to share with you a lot of things about myself, about the past in Hong Kong and about what I interpret to be the current situation in Hong Kong.

Sure. That's why I'm here. I was overjoyed when I got your phone call last night suggesting we could meet up today for a chat. You are my most admired teacher and the best I've ever had. How could I say NO?

So, making a start, let me say this much first about my view on the immediate causes of the unrest, protests and demonstrations turning riotous and smacking of a revolutionary. The so-called 'yellow-ribbonists' have actually labelled their so-called movement as 'Liberating Hong Kong and Revolution of the Age'. As you can see, everything that's been happening and moving on the way, indicates very clearly that this is a well-planned *coup* bent on overthrowing the Hong Kong Government and eventually, as these rebels hope, jeopardising and even overthrowing the Central Government of the People's Republic of China. Having said that, all the same, well-planned as it may be, this crazy revolutionary action has been stretched too long and it has not been successful in hitting the right target, as these rebels haven't been able to get anywhere close to the 'epicentre' of governance and power! It's been over six months now. Although a lot of harm and damages in material and, even worse, in mental and psychological terms have been done to Hong Kong as a metropolis and to the Hong Kong people, especially the grassroots, the Government is still strong and firm, definitely able to weather the storm.

Right, I agree. But will an end come soon?

Not obvious, Julian, no. I don't think a kind of definite or complete end will come soon, but as the rebels gradually but surely lose their grip and their resources from all conceivable quarters dwindle, which is happening now and happening quite fast, their movement will die a natural death. But the aftermath would possibly be that the Government wouldn't be able to emerge unscathed, like the phoenix in the legend, but would rather crumble of its own accord and the Central Government might need to do something about that. Anyway, I am not going to speculate about that. I'd like rather to try to give you my interpretation and explanation of the origin and eventual outcome of this movement or revolution, whichever people may like to call it.

Splendid Professor. Let's go into that please.

Now a lot of journalists and even some academics and scholars have been trying to explain that the whole thing is a lack of identity on the part of these rebels. They don't identify themselves with China. They don't consider themselves Chinese. They even insult and decry China, using such derogatory terms that imperialists from the West and from the so-called Imperial Japanese Empire and other bigots used back in the mid- and late

nineteenth century. Laughable, ludicrous, right? What's then their identity? If they are not Chinese, then what are they? They are certainly Chinese by nationality as they are residents of Hong Kong and Hong Kong is part of the People's Republic of China. But of course that's paper identity. For a lot of them, probably they identify themselves with America or Britain and that's why they are waving the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes all along! But that's exactly their tragedy. Neither America nor Britain would take them, at least not all of them, to their embraces and give them any kind of shelter at the end of the day when their movement and their cause should come to naught! That's plain to see, knowing America and Britain.

I can follow you Professor, but do you agree that the heart of the problem is a lack of identity for these rebels?

Yes and no. Let me explain. As a matter of fact, quite a lot of people in Hong Kong, especially those who came to Hong Kong after 1949, a lot of these were Nationalists or Nationalist sympathizers, who never recognized the People's Republic as the rightful Chinese ruler. They would rather exist, and I deliberately use the word 'exist' to describe their intention to live their lives in Hong Kong just to stay alive rather than living under Communist rule, and for them that rule was really unpleasant in their days. Yes, they would rather exist under British colonial rule. Well, in time their next generation and the generation after that generation have planted their roots deep and strong in Hong Kong, calling Hong Kong their home and even their 'country', which explains why these people want Hong Kong to become an independent state. But of course it's not as simple as that.

Quite, I was going to give you that response. But, if that's not the entire explanation, what else is there to account for it?

Patience Julian. I am coming to that now.

Sorry Professor, have some tea before your mouth dries up talking on and on.

Thanks Julian. It's awfully nice of you, so thoughtful! Right, let me have a sip. This is superb! OK. Now, let me get back to my narrative. As you know, the population in Hong Kong has increased more than sevenfold since the 1950s, from less than one million to over seven million now, and that's only the official figure. I reckon there are a lot of unregistered and illegal numbers looming and lurking in the invisible background. Anyway, since

the 1950s and throughout the 1960s and 1970s a lot of young people were born in Hong Kong and grew up here, coming of age and taking matters into their own hands. They gradually turned into a kind of force that eventually would rebel against the ruling class both in Hong Kong and in Mainland China. These people were not entirely the same as their parents and grandparents who had come to Hong Kong as refugees and then settled down for good. No, in addition to sharing most of their parents' and grandparent's ideological inclinations and beliefs, they had been educated in the British system and some had imbibed western ideas and political ideals and theories from their study sojourns in the West – in America and Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and France and Germany, and so on. And they have been following the changes taking place through these years in the West and in China, waiting for an opportunity to achieve their political goal, that they have been harbouring for years, handed down from grandparents and parents, in turn to be handed down to their children and grandchildren. So, you see, this lack of identity with China has never been something new. It's been with a lot of people in Hong Kong for generations! It's therefore not too much to say that for these people, Hong Kong IS their country. So how can we expect them to accept Chinese rule with open arms?!

Yes, I agree, but why are these young rebels waving the American and British flags and even other flags and disfiguring the Chinese flag and even the Hong Kong SAR flag?

Well, to really get to the heart of the matter we need to do a bit of Chinese history. Are you interested?

Sure, that's why I'm asking. Do go on Professor.

Very well. You know some experts and some journalists in Hong Kong recently put up whole pages in local newspapers trying to tell the common people about the real origin and history of this movement, intending to make the rebels change their minds and turn over a new leaf, so to speak. All for naught, naturally, and things are getting even more out of hand. So, the way I see it, the kind of history that we'd need to take a look at, isn't just the events since or shortly before the Opium War and British imperialism and so on all the way to now, but rather, we should go back to the times shortly before and even after the First Emperor, that is Emperor Chin, who ostensibly unified all China.

Professor, why ostensibly? What do you mean by that?

Good question. Exactly this was what Emperor Chin thought that he had achieved, unifying all China. But alas, all he had succeeded in unifying was the system, including one Chinese written language for all China, standardizing measurements of length, quantity and weight, etc. and not to forget the splendid roads and other transport and communications systems and certainly the Great Wall! But he never succeeded in unifying the hearts and minds of the different factions from the former defeated vassals and tiny princelings who had then to succumb to Chin rule. These people never identified themselves with the Central Government and would rebel and jeopardize the Empire any time they saw an opportunity showing up. At the same time, and for these rebellious minds good news, the Huns and other nomadic tribes in the Northwest and Northeast never tired of invading China. Actually, Emperor Chin never succeeded in quelling these invaders, nor all the rulers since him, all the way to the collapse of the Han Dynasty. So, it's not a new thing for foreign interests to try to meddle with Chinese affairs by allying with local rebellious factions, a trick that the British cunningly took up and even perfected to eventually colonise India and a lot of their other colonies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Now the Americans have been using this trick, no doubt learning from the British, to turn the whole world upside down since the end of the Second World War.

Professor, I can see what you are driving at. But how do you account for the lack of identity of some people in Hong Kong? Surely, this thread all the way from the Chin days up to now does seem a bit overstretched.

Now Julian, didn't we agree that you would not debate with me. This is my view and it's a personal view, not necessarily backed with hard evidence.

Oh sorry Professor! Do continue. I won't do that again.

It's nothing, Julian. I don't need to elaborate a bit more. Well, let's have another sip of puer tea before I continue. OK?

Sure ... hmm Can I suggest we order some more dim sums?

By all means. You do feel a bit monotonous, listening to my grumbling and just drinking tea, right?

It's not that really, but some special dim sums would be a good idea. My treat naturally!

Please fill out this order slip then. The head waiter, the 'captain', is a good friend of mine. He'll be at the table in no time once you have filled that out.

Thanks Professor. And Mr. Ho, thanks!

My pleasure.

OK, Julian, let me carry on then.

Right, please Professor.

Actually, my view is that for a lot of Chinese people in the South, since time immemorial, it's difficult to have a kind of national identity with the Central Government. The capital was so far away and the ruling class so remote and unknown to them. All they could identify with was the hardship imposed on them by the Central Government in heavy levies and taxes, stripping them of their farming produce and the fruit of their hard labour. How could they have love for the rulers and their mandarins, over half of them were corrupt and they hard pressed the common people for money and other materials? So, for generations since the earliest times the so-called 'southern savages', so labelled by the rulers in the capital up north, never identified with the sovereign power, be that Emperor Chin or Chairman Mao or now Premier Xi. At the same time, like their ancestors, they see it so convenient to ally with foreign powers and interests that claim to stand by them, and in time they begin to identify themselves with these foreign powers and interest groups. Patriotism is not something in their vocabulary. It is totally alien to them. They consider it is their right to live in Hong Kong as their own sovereign state, or at least sovereign city. They intend to overthrow the Hong Kong SAR Government and replace it with a system of their own making. And it is crystal clear that the so-called Democrats in Hong Kong have been assisting them, using them no doubt to further and hopefully eventually to achieve their own end, whatever that may be.

Professor, now I am beginning to see why these rebels are so determined and so hard-headed about it all and why they seem to be allied with foreign interests and powers. Do you think they will get their way and what's going

Oh Professor, time really flies. It's five o'clock already. So we've been discussing and savouring fine appetisers and tea for three hours now. Do you need a break?

No, not really. I am all into this now and I am so happy to be able to spell it all out with you. But are you tired of listening to all this crazy talk from me?

No, no, not in the least. I am prepared to stay here all day, and even all night long to get to the very heart of the matter if you can stay that long too.

Great! Julian, I'd love to do that, and Mr. Ho will bear with us, right Mr. Ho? Can we stay until you close?

Sure, no problem, up to eleven if you like.

Right. Thanks so much. Now Julian, let me say a bit more before we place an order for a fine dinner. I've got something great in mind for this evening.

Certainly, I do look forward to both, your talk now and the fine cuisine later. Pray proceed.

OK. Where were we? Ah yes. Getting their way. Now, if China should be in the same state as she had been in forty or fifty years ago and these rebels could have the more or less full backing in financial and even military terms by America and even Taiwan, then the rebels in Hong Kong would get their way, that is, they would very probably manage to overthrow the Hong Kong SAR Government and even weaken China in the process. But things are very different now. For one thing, China is very strong and America is going downhill in every respect, economically, politically and even militarily. Besides, America has planted too many enemies, real ones and potential ones, while China especially with the success of the *One Belt, One Road Initiative*, has managed to lead the so-called Third World as well as Russia, and even Japan to some extent. Sooner or later, the rebels would die out and the foreign powers and interests would subside as well, while China would 'reform' Hong Kong in such a way that the trouble would be quelled once and for all, at least for a couple of decades. China's influence is destined here to stay up to at least the twenty-forties. By the way, I'd like to show you some recent newspaper clippings. Some coverage is informative and I have also got a particular journalist's interpretation of the current situation in I-Ching terms - superb! Take a good look now.



Professor, what are you trying to show me?

Well, as you can see, the police are now adopting a new tactic. Instead of using tear gas to try to drive away the rebels, they are now arresting them in large numbers on the charge of illegal assemblies and harbouring weapons, etc. This way the rebels will soon lose their upper hand as their numbers dwindle and the police will be able to wipe them out. But what I am trying to discuss with you is more than just this, more than just if the rebels will or will not get their way, which I am sure they won't, given the current strength and influence in China and the more aggressive tactics of the Hong Kong Police Force. What I'd like to suggest is that the whole world is now at a kind of crossroads, with China and America, the two giants standing on two opposing sides of a veritable WATERSHED!

Professor, this is very interesting! Please tell me more what you mean by this, this watershed. What is watershed?

Sure. This is going to be the highest point for our discussion. To prepare for it well, let's have our fine food first. Shall we?

Of course, great food. Sure.

OK then. Mr. Ho, you can serve the dinner now.

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